Brookenya: Building Cultural Bridges Using the World’s Most Popular Genre

By Mike Lavin

Gardner’s very noticeable passion and excitement for this project.

Brookenya is a community-based collaborative interchange and intrachange between volunteers in Brooklyn, USA, and Kisumu, Kenya. Locally, you have a diverse group of neighbors, representing a variety of ages, occupations and racial backgrounds, who probably would have never met if they did not become involved in putting together Brookenya. Working in partnership, these volunteers edit, write, film and act—to create the Brookenya scenes. “Scenes or subplots,” Kate said, “grew out of the participants’ own experiences and have often dealt with difficult themes, including intolerance, discrimination, homophobia and sexual assault.” These experiences are translated and fused into themes for the soap opera melodrama found in Brookenya. The same cheating, pretense, arrogance, romance and deceit you would find in As the World Turns are depicted in Brookenya’s plots. It was certainly not unintentional that soap operas were chosen as a vehicle of performance. Soap operas are the most popular genre of television drama in the world today.

So here you have it—a group of your average neighbors, right here in Brooklyn, creating and performing in a soap opera about their lives while at the same time developing social awareness and skills through their work. On the other side of the Atlantic, community members from Kisumu, Kenya, who also come from different ethnic backgrounds, ages and occupations, work to create plots for Brookenya. “We have community theater occurring in Kisumu that is both similar to and different from what is occurring here in Brooklyn,” remarks Kate. Members of the Kenyan community collaborate with those in Brooklyn to generate Brookenya’s art: they join together in writing, acting and filming scenes for Brookenya. The material and plots are very different, however, from the Brooklyn scenarios. Kate Gardner emphasizes, “The strength of the project is that the organizing framework allowed us to collaborate while recognizing our vast cultural and economic differences.”

But how exactly does this actually work in practice? I received a tape from Kate called “Where Brooklyn, NY Meets Kisumu, Kenya” which answers just this question. It depicts a number of episodes created and performed by Brookenya. One of the segments, for example, deals with the story of a woman from Kenya who tenaciously searches for her infidelity-prone husband who had fathered in Brooklyn. The woman flies 7000 miles to Brooklyn, finds the son and convinces the young man to come home—which he does. Here you have an artful method of creating interconnectedness, where the actress who plays the Kenyan mother is exposed to US urban culture and at the same time the young performer who plays the son is exposed to Kenyan culture.

In summary, we have two groups of writers, actors and show producers representing two communities on two continents. Global dialogue is achieved by the use of cell phones, instant messaging, Internet chats, email (often with BIG attachments!), videotape exchange and so on. Kate Gardner would say that this is indeed a “strange methodology for bringing disparate people together to create something that can make a difference.” Brookenya is not a place in the sense of being an empirical-observational space—it is more of a metaphysical space like ‘Our Town,’ where ordinary persons create the extraordinary by experiencing each other locally as well as globally.

Photo credits: Kate Gardner